

Max Desmars' Story

Maxime was a junior phenom on the courts, but he experienced his rise to tennis excellence in a uniquely French way. He began playing tennis when he was 5 or 6 years old, hitting balls a few times a week with his parents and sister at a local public court near his home in Nantes. But things changed rather quickly when a group of pros scouting out young talent visited his local club. He was asked to demonstrate his backhand, forehand, and other basic strokes, and not long thereafter found himself placed with some of the best pro coaches and best young talent in the region (France is divided into 18 administrative regions, and Nantes is in the Pays de la Loire, in western France).

Max's training and progress accelerated, and by age 9 he began participating in national tournaments.

His success only continued. At age 12, he reached another pivotal point in his development as an elite junior tennis player. He was selected to join the state Academy for tennis -- Le Pôle Espoirs -- which placed him with other young talent, but, not unlike Nick Bollettieri's legendary juniors tennis boarding school in Bradenton, Florida, the Academy separated kids from their families (they lived at the facility) so that they could focus seriously on their training. "I still remember that day," Max reminisces. The coaches called his parents and declared, "We would like to have Max in the Academy." The family separation was difficult, especially for his older sister Nastasia, but Max was able to see his family on weekends. His schooling took place at the Centre Educatif Nantais pour Sportifs (CENS) in the mornings. A typical afternoon at Le Pôle Espoirs (the Academy) was filled with intensive training. The Academy only chose the top two or three athletes in the region, the boys and girls that demonstrated the most athletic potential for the country.

For three years, Max lived and breathed tennis, playing in highly competitive national

and international tournaments. By age 14 Max was ranked 39th in France as a junior player. But at age 15, things changed once again. He left the Academy in 2004, opting for homeschooling for a period of time, but returned to CENS and graduated in 2008. His family was very supportive throughout, as his father had long been attentive to his progress, even keeping detailed log books of all of his matches.

When Max was 16 he beat David Goffin in a notable 6-2 6-2 straight-set victory, and even remarked to his father at the time, “Just wait, this kid is going to be really good. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to beat him again” –

Max turned his eyes towards another passion, Coaching. Max was in fact excited to know that he could pursue a career that perfectly aligned with his talents and interests.

One way to realize this goal was to come to the United States. His next step was to compete in college tennis -- there is no such tradition of college athletics in France -- but in order to do this, he needed to take the TOEFL exam as well as the SAT. His English was not good enough to get into a Division I school, but he found the perfect fit at Lander University in Greenwood, South Carolina, a Division II school that was ranked in the top 8 for tennis. Max played there for four years, from 2009-2012, with an athletic scholarship. His gut feeling that coaching was his calling began to take shape.

At about this time, he reached out to Sophie at Brookstone about a summer internship. At the end of the Summer Sophie said once you graduate, I have a full time job for you!

He had known that he wanted to get into

coaching since he was 17, and even remembers thinking as a child, “When I am older, I want to be in shorts, shirt, and play tennis.”

As Max began to develop his coaching style he was fortunate to have Sophie Woorons, PhD as his mentor. Max describes her as “probably one of the best Directors of the country.”

He explains, “She shared so much knowledge with me; without her I would know less about teaching. She gave me positive and negative feedback pretty much after each clinic/lesson my first year. She also taught me the business side of a tennis club. Sophie

spent countless hours and wrote hundreds of pages to sponsor me so I could have a work visa and stay in the USA. She brought me to conferences so I could meet my fellow pros and learn from the best. Telling her that my wife and I were leaving for Raleigh was one of the hardest things I had to do but I am glad we are still staying in touch.” Woorons is a nationally experienced player and coach, with credentials that range from ten National championships to a Ph.D in sport pedagogy from the University of Georgia.

As he became more experienced in coaching, certain teaching strategies began to come into focus for him. Max found that he enjoyed using creative images and expressions to help his students remember how to move or hit properly. For instance, the movement of a two-handed backhand was similar to throwing a scarf over one’s shoulder (somewhat dramatically!). This mode of communication proved to be especially useful when working with younger children; for instance, when teaching the volley, he helps younger kids to remember to step forward as they hit by encouraging them to “step on the ant!”

Max has come up with other expressions for other strokes on the court, and has even written about his coaching philosophy (in various tennis publications in the United States) that is inspired by his unique background and perspective.

His cross-cultural experiences have helped him to identify some significant differences between the game of tennis as it is played in France versus the mode of play in the United States. In France, he notes, “In practice, it didn’t matter if you won or lost. We cared more about ‘how can I get better?’ Practice was less competitive.” In contrast, in the United States, the dynamics of the court even during practice sessions are much more competitive. “In France, it was different -- we tried to make ourselves better as a team and help our friends. It was less important to win a point in practice than it was to build up the entire group.”

Even the style of play differs between the two cultures. Max explains, “In France, we look more on touch, drop shots, slices. Here, it’s about hitting a lot of balls: hit 1,000 balls a day! Still, Max acknowledges that there are benefits to incorporating both styles of play into one’s game, and he has learned to bring the best of both worlds into his coaching.

Max’s sophisticated understanding of the game as it is practiced both here and in France translates well onto the court as he coaches all levels of players. In fact, one of his strengths is working with an individual player to identify an attainable goal, regardless of their level. He explains, “I can connect with the juniors even if they are not as good as the Academy kids. It is ok to have a goal to play high school tennis, even if that goal is not as high as most of the players here.”

Likewise, with adults, “It does not matter to me if you are 2.5 or a 6.0.” Regardless of their ability, Max wants them to love the sport, stay healthy, and enjoy their time on the court. One of the challenges with adults is identifying their particular learning style in order to maximize their playing potential. “With adults, it’s a little different. It’s not just teaching strokes, it’s trying to figure out how their minds work.”

Teaching juniors has its own challenges. Max noted early in his coaching career (in a 2012 USPTA article) that if you are a parent of a young tennis player, “You should see the sport of tennis as a very long journey where your child will win and lose. Do not focus on the result but on the process.” Juniors are particularly malleable and sensitive to how their parents respond to their progress. So keep encouraging and don’t ride the roller coaster!